



The
LAST WEST

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The Last West

By

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*O "Land of the Shining Mountains!"
And home of the lowing herds.
The flocks are afield on thy hilltops,
Thy forests are vocal with birds.
Here gold and silver were hidden,
The lead and copper and coal.
Here cataracts, chasms and snow peaks
Stun to silence the talkative soul.*

The last West! There is a suggestion of sadness in the words, a lingering cadence of regret, as of

Sunset and evening star,
And after that the dark—

as though we had come to the end of the way—and we have. The latest West is the last West. There are no longer great tracts of land, empires in extent, to be opened up to settlement in America. Smaller areas, to be sure, will be opened up from time to time—Indian reservations in part, irrigation districts, Alaskan valleys—and always there will be need of home mission effort to establish the church in these new sections. But the movements of hundreds of thousands across the frontiers of history, tidal waves of whole peoples that have swept from the shores of every land are ended. We in the West are witnesses today of the ebbing tide.

For centuries, milleniums, men have heard the call of the West. It is not new—this call. The West has always been calling—even before the dawn of human his-



FAIRFIELD, MONTANA

tory, in the dim twilight of tradition, in the darkness of prehistoric ages. Since the day when the sons of Noah left the ark on Ararat, since primitive man left the cradle of the race in western Asia, men have followed the trail toward the West.

As with secular so with sacred history. Abraham followed the beckoning stars and journeyed toward the West. Paul, the Traveler, fared westward to Greece, to Rome, to Spain. The Pilgrim Fathers sailed toward the setting sun. Their children "followed the gleam" over the mountain and meadow in New England and New York, out through the wide valleys of the Middle West, and then across desert and rocky ridge beyond the snowy peaks and "the endless woods where rolls the Oregon."

But the latest move is backward. The last West lies east. The newest Northwest is the high plateau stretching from the Rockies toward the Missouri. Here the frontier is making its last stand. Here civilization is making its final conquest. The "Forty-niners" on their way to California



FARMERS' HALL

and the "Ninety-eighters" on their way to the Klondike spurned the soil of the high plateaus beneath their seven-leagued boots. Some came back barefoot, lagging along the same wide benches and narrow valleys, and have found homes and happiness in the so-called American desert, which by the magic of dry-farming and the life-giving waters afforded by irrigation, has been made to blossom as the rose.

This area includes the western dry-land section of the Dakotas, Wyoming, Idaho, and the state of Montana. To be sure, this territory is a part of what the geographies of our childhood called a desert, and, indeed, of late years it has been a land of little rain. Yet Montana and her sister states resent the imputation that this is a desert land, and in denial of the indictment point to the fertile valleys and wide-sweeping benches that have produced in all but late years—and will again—a superabundance of flax, wheat, alfalfa, and even corn.

Let us consider for a moment our missionary fields and churches. The writer has



A MONTANA WHEAT FIELD

long been a member of the state home missionary force, having had charge of the large Plentywood Parish for a number of years, and more recently, as Associate Superintendent of Montana has been located at Great Falls, with the oversight of the dry-farming section in the northeastern part of the state, reaching points along the line of the Great Northern and in the interior districts, even to the Missouri River. The devotion of the home missionary in the churches and the mothers in the homes have made, as in Isaiah's day, a roadway in the desert for our God. Crooked places are being made straight and the glory of the Lord is being revealed. Here, in the last great West, is the last and greatest opportunity for evangelization. Let us make the most of it before the rush of events in this vast region sweeps away the eagerness of desire among the people for the Kingdom and its riches.

Nearly forty years ago Congregational missions were inaugurated in the town of Billings, now a city of nearly twenty thou-

sand, then one hundred and seventy miles beyond the terminus of the Union Pacific. Twenty-five years of effort following saw only about a dozen churches established. The new science of dry-land farming completely revolutionized agriculture in the semi-arid plateaus east of the Rocky Mountains. A great tide of immigration followed. The thousand-mile ranges where the cattle on the hills and the sheep in the valleys had brought wealth to few were divided into homesteads that gave a competence to the many—for a time. In a few years Montana's population was increased by hundreds of thousands, passing the half million mark before the census of 1920, which showed the highest rate of increase of any state for the decade.

During the last fifteen years the churches of the Congregational order have increased from twelve to over one hundred. All honor to the men on the firing line! On the far frontier they are fighting the battles of Christianity.

Like the soldier's much of the missionary's life is commonplace, almost tawdry, decidedly unheroic. Camp and march, trench life and hospital experience are remarkably interesting; but now and then a battle intervenes. Now and then a comedy or tragedy breaks the monotony of the story of the frontier preacher. From the grizzled veteran of nearly seventy winters—and there have been several of him—making records for younger men to wonder at, to the summer student who transforms a town or countryside in a three months' pastorate; from the women preachers, God bless them

for their courage, to the college-bred, seminary-trained prophets who have left their mantles on the shoulders of others and gone to that heaven of the western preacher—an eastern pulpit; from city pastor to country parson I have sought to draw illustrations of what God can do for a man or woman who gives Him the right of way in their lives. And also what God can do for a state when honest, courageous, consecrated Christian leaders and followers exalt the Cross and establish the Church that Christ gave his life to save.

